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# Why Do We Farm in Alaska?

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By

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**I**f you want food like mama made, grow it. Alaskan Indians, Eskimos, and Aleuts knew how to find food year round, but outsiders who came to Alaska wanted food like they ate at home. So some of them farmed.

Russians were the first westerners to farm in Alaska. According to records, they started farming in 1784 at Three Saints Bay (now called Old Harbor) on Kodiak Island.

## **GOLD STAMPEDERS NEEDED FOOD**

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When Fairbanks began in 1901, people started farming right away. If you couldn't make money digging for gold, you sure could make it by selling goods to the folks who were digging for gold. Fairbanks' dry, sunny summers allowed wheat, oats and barley to ripen, along with many vegetables. By 1917 Fairbanks had its own flour mill and a bakery making fresh bread. Grains were handy for making other products too. Remnants of the brewery that made Midnight Sun beer can be seen at the University of Alaska Experiment farm where the old fermenting vats now hold grain for livestock.

## **DEPRESSION BROUGHT MORE FARMERS**

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The Great Depression in the lower 48 states prompted many people to come and try to earn a living in Alaska. The famous Matanuska



Colony began in 1935. This was a federal government project. Farmers from elsewhere in the United States who were having trouble making ends meet were offered land in Alaska's Matanuska Valley, just north of Anchorage. Although most of those original colonists soon gave up on farming in Alaska, the tradition of farming in the picturesque Matanuska Valley continued. Today the Mat Valley is the largest agriculture area in the state.

## **INTERIOR FARMING GREW, TOO**

Fairbanks and other Tanana Valley farming communities also grew during the Depression. People from outside of Alaska who were not a part of the Matanuska Colony came to Fairbanks. But, Fairbanksans had been farming long before anyone ever thought about a Matanuska Colony. By the time the Mat Colony began, a major Fairbanks agriculture landmark already was in place. The Creamer Dairy, which marked its beginnings in 1904, produced milk and ice cream for Fairbanksans until 1966. The Creamer farm now is on the National Historic Register and its grain fields and pastures are a state wildlife sanctuary.

## **WORLD WAR II CREATED NEW MARKETS**

World War II and the Cold War that followed brought changes to all of Alaska, in-

cluding Alaskan agriculture. The United States government considered Alaska to be a critical location for potential enemy infiltration and made great efforts to protect the territory. Military came to Alaska in large numbers. With them came new roads, schools, stores, and restaurants as well as modern agricultural technology.

## **VETERANS TOOK UP HOMESTEADING**

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In addition to the military's needs, farming increased in Alaska during the post-World War II years because veterans, who had first choice of lands, homesteaded. Also, as in every event that brought people to Alaska, when that event was over, some people just plain wanted to stay in Alaska. As long as land was available to homestead (and homesteading meant farming, according to the Federal Homestead Act), homesteading was a great way to get started—for those who had the fortitude to meet its requirements.

## **COMPETITION ENDED FARMING BOOM**

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Alaska's post-war boom in agriculture ended in the 1960s. Even with modern technology, farmers could not grow their products as cheaply in Alaska as shippers could import products from the lower 48 states.



Huge container ships now brought food and supplies to Alaska from southern ports. Containers could be off-loaded at ports and transported by train, truck or plane to anywhere in Alaska. Airfields were everywhere, and Alaskan "bush" pilots could land a plane even where there were no airfields. Meat, vegetables and dairy products arrived at Alaskan stores almost as fresh as products found in supermarkets in the rest of the nation.

## **OIL BROUGHT NEED FOR DIVERSITY**

As money came in from oil at Prudhoe Bay in the late 1970s and early 1980s, the state invested some of its oil money in the development of large-scale agriculture. The goal was to diversify the economy so that there would be sources of income for Alaskans when the oil wells stopped producing. Two major agriculture projects began: one, a dairy production project at Point McKenzie, near Anchorage; and the other, a grain production project in Delta Junction, about 100 miles southeast of Fairbanks. These agriculture development projects set the stage for growth of Alaskan agriculture.

Although some farms in these projects failed, others succeeded. For example, a grass and grain seed operation and a dairy in Delta Junction produced their products successfully and now claim fair shares of the markets. Other farmers, not a part of the projects, began to farm during this period also, and from this group came some of Alaska's current successful growers.

## **VEGGIES, FLOWERS ARE MONEY-MAKERS**

Today, horticultural products, especially greenhouse-grown bedding plants, comprise the major source of money-making agricul-

ture in Alaska. And money-making it can be. There are some million-dollar businesses around the state. People's desire for fresh vegetables for a healthy lifestyle probably help to create a market for locally-grown produce. In addition, locally-grown ornamentals, such as poinsettias, roses and hardy landscaping trees and shrubs, appeal to many Alaskans. The roses and poinsettias are especially welcome because they are fresher and longer-lasting than those that must travel 2,000 miles or more to reach Alaska.

## **TRY THEM, YOU'LL LIKE THEM**

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Alaskan products are good. Many of us feel that Alaskan-grown flowers are more brilliant in color than their counterparts in the Lower 48. Many of us think Alaskan vegetables taste better and have a more succulent texture than those barged in from the south. Even non-carrot-lovers may like our sweet Alaskan carrots. Alaskan potatoes also taste sweet and are enjoyed by many without condiments. Alaskan potatoes have been sold in markets elsewhere in the country, including Idaho, where they were displayed right next to Idaho potatoes.

It isn't easy to earn a living by farming anywhere in the country these days. Alaskan farmers have to work hard to produce their products. Sometimes farmers stay out all night to pick green beans so the beans will not become over mature. The sun shines almost all night and the beans keep growing. The expression about making hay while the sun shines is especially true in Alaska. If the hay is ripe, you may find farmers out in the middle of the night cutting and bailing.

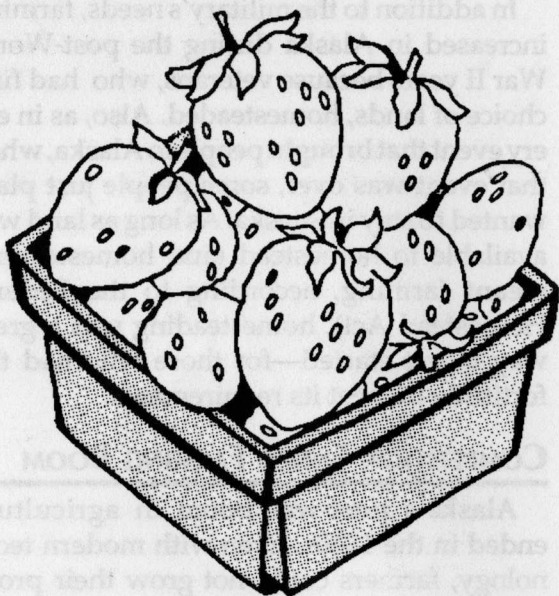
## **LOOK FOR 'ALASKA GROWN' LOGO**

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Alaskan agriculture has come a long way



since the days of Russian explorers and the days of the gold rushes. You can buy Alaska grown foods in supermarkets and order them at restaurants throughout the state. Take a trip to the Tanana Valley Farmers' Market and other markets in the 49th State, where you can buy fresh Alaskan produce and talk to the people who grow it. Look for the "Alaska Grown" logo when you go shopping.



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**Dr. Barbara E. Greene** has done research in food quality for many years and also authored a history of land use changes in the Chena Hot Springs Road area near Fairbanks for an M.S. degree in natural resources received from the University of Alaska Fairbanks in 1988. She earned her B.S. degree in home economics from Florida Southern College in 1957 and Ph.D in food and nutrition from Florida State University in 1966.

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